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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	1
I. The Solipsist and the Assassins . . . . .	5
II. Diachronics . . . . .	11
III. Philosophical Development . . . . .	18
1. Descartes (1641) . . . . .	19
2. Locke (1690). . . . .	22
3. Berkeley (1710). . . . .	26
4. Hume (1748). . . . .	33
5. Kant (1780). . . . .	35
IV. The 'I' Century . . . . .	40
V. Wittgenstein . . . . .	49
VI. Conclusion: Return to the Moral . . . . .	68
Bibliography . . . . .	76
Vita . . . . .	78

On Solipsism

by

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No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main.

John Donne

### Introduction

For what represents, if anything, an instance of the philosopher's overindulgence and/or fetish for "technical terms," look no further than 'solipsism', the name we generally give to the claim 'I alone exist'. Taking the claim at face value, it's doubtful whether anyone could form a suitable concept for the term. The attempt to render a solipsistic worldview immediately runs up against our familiarity of basic social relationships and the manner in which we have learned to conduct ourselves, both entrenched in our everyday or "common sense" experience of the world. The notion is so far removed from our lived experience that, with the possible exception of fiction, a precise or exact conception is impossible to grasp. Not surprisingly, when philosophers use the term 'solipsism' they do not mean what they say.

To understand how this somewhat embarrassing state of mislabeling has come to pass, we might begin by thinking of philosophy as a garden and solipsism as a weed. The eyesore plant has sprung up, been picked at, hacked at and trampled but never fully dug out, never killed off completely. Now, after spreading underground, the weed has popped up again in several other places. The overall beauty and utility of the garden have not been spoiled, so for the most part, the weeds are simply ignored.

Today, the word 'solipsism' can refer to any of several related ideas—'only I exist,' 'nothing can be known but the self,' 'there is nothing but self,' 'all I know is myself'—all of which sound equally preposterous to the non-philosopher, but each of which carry particular commitments and preconceptions implicit to the beliefs held by a great many philosophers. The fundamental assumptions on which solipsism rests—that what an individual can know with the greatest certainty are the contents of his or her

own mind, that man is made of body and soul and that no two people can have exactly the same experience—underlie much of today's philosophical reasoning and are still accepted in wider society as fact.

Ultimately, solipsism is what we get when we advance our basic beliefs to the limits toward which they tend. For that reason, and judging by the relative dearth of literature on the topic, a serious or comprehensive examination of solipsism has been regarded as superfluous. Philosophers have rarely taken up the matter seriously. This fact alone should pique our interest. If there is nothing to solipsism, why did we bother to give it a name?

By way of answering the question, the following entails two historical analyses, one involving the term 'solipsism' and the other relating the philosophical development of the concept. The unorthodox approach taken here—separating the use and meaning of the term from its theoretical context—is necessitated by the fact that solipsism is not a doctrine or theory per se. Rather, it is a derivative notion, the confluence of

several other doctrines. The concept has emerged through no deliberate act of any one philosopher or school of philosophy. Despite that fact, the associated term is and has been used with fairly clear intentions. It's therefore reasonable to ask whether the term carries any weight as it's actually used, which is tantamount to asking after the underlying concept. Separate analyses help to maintain a proper distinction between the tangible and the tangential.

By way of introduction, the story of Giovanni Gentile is presented as a case study. Special attention is paid to idealism, the philosophical bed of solipsism, and later to Wittgenstein, the only philosopher to ever publicly endorse the solipsistic claim. Finally, the case will be made that solipsism, in a limited moral application, may be used as a viable premise.



## **I. The Solipsist and the Assassins**

How strange to think of him passing out of existence in such a way, not by death but by fading out in the sun or by being lost and forgotten somewhere in the universe!

James Joyce  
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

On April 15, 1944, fate posed Giovanni Gentile the harshest test a philosopher could face. Born in Castelvetro, Sicily in 1875 and educated in Pisa, Gentile was the twentieth century's self-proclaimed 'philosopher of Fascism.' He developed a theory of active idealism or, as he called it, 'actualism' that integrated the pure act of thinking with the individual's conscious experience. Taking idealism farther than Hegel or Bradley, Gentile denied any notion of existence or reality outside the present activity of reflective awareness (i.e., thought). He also denied distinctions between theory and practice, subject and object, past and present, etc., as mere mental constructs. Thought was absolute and, in an echo of Hegel, the real was the pure act of thinking.

Gentile presented his theories in two volumes<sup>1</sup> between 1916-1917 and rose to prominence in Italy during the interwar years, at the same time becoming a dedicated supporter of the Fascist movement. Soon after the Blackshirts marched on Rome and installed Mussolini as Premier, Gentile was named Minister of Education. He officially joined the Fascist Party in 1923 and from then on his philosophy served the ideology of the regime, helping to lay the foundations of the Fascist corporate state. Drawing on his extreme interpretation of Hegel, Gentile attempted to cast Fascism as a model for the Hegelian notion of an ethical state. The main points of his thesis were published in 1932, when, as directing editor of the *Enciclopedia italiana*, Gentile helped Mussolini pen the entry for 'Fascism':

The conception of the Liberal State is not that of a directing force, guiding the play and development, both material and spiritual, of a collective body, but merely a force limited to the function of recording results: on the other hand, the Fascist State is itself conscious and has

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<sup>1</sup> *Teoria generale della spirito come atto puro* (The Theory of the Mind as Pure Act 1916; trans. 1922); *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere* (System of Logic as Theory of Knowing, 1917).

itself a will and a personality—thus it may be called the "ethic" State....<sup>2</sup>

The "conscious" Fascist state was rooted in the concrete experience of individuals and could therefore be interpreted as functionally analogous to the absolute or transcendental mind. Both served as agents in the creation of reality. The state had a "personality" and a "will" and manifested the pure act of thinking upon which the subjective consciousness of each of its citizens was based. The Fascist state created reality and so any actions undertaken in the name of the state had to be accepted and embraced by the citizenry as a condition for further advance. Gentile argued that Fascism, the first active form of a republic, was best understood as a natural step in the dialectical evolution of human governance:

If every age has its own characteristic doctrine, there are a thousand signs which point to Fascism as the characteristic doctrine of our time. For if a doctrine must be a living thing, this is proved by the fact that Fascism has created a living faith; and that this faith is very powerful in the minds of men is demonstrated by those who have suffered and died for it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From *The Internet Modern History Sourcebook*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Twelve years later, after the fall of Mussolini in Rome, Gentile's passion for Fascism led him to follow *Il Duce* north to the puppet Republic established by the Germans at Salò. On the fifteenth of April, Gentile was strolling down a lane in Florence when anti-Fascist communists snuck up behind him and shot him in the back of the head. Aside from the fact that he lay dead in the street, the assassins' bullets posed a curious problem for Gentile's philosophy: by what or by whose pure act of thinking was the murder made real? If we say Gentile was the agent, then in effect, he caused his own death (an interesting slant on suicide). Or if we say it was the assassins' thoughts that somehow trumped Gentile's (assuming he didn't want to die), then in the minds of the communist partisans Gentile was assassinated; but in his own mind, what? He disappeared? Faded into the sun? Perhaps he simply forgot himself.

The dilemma will never be satisfactorily resolved because the juxtaposition of reality and philosophy marking the death of Giovanni Gentile also struck an

ultimate refutation of solipsism. Gentile died at the hands of others and that fact, tragically, ironically or otherwise, literally shatters his solipsistic claim.

To the non-solipsist, Gentile's death merely demonstrates the absurdity of his philosophic beliefs. Solipsism does not jibe with the world. Even accepting, for the sake of argument, the weaker epistemological principle that the self is all an individual can know with certainty, a good deal of effort would have to be spent resolving the case where reality and an individual's experience of reality coincide. As heirs of Descartes and Freud, we no longer think of the self as monolithic. An attempt to provide a solipsistic account for the mundane events in daily life would force an explication of which aspects of the self were operating at any given time. Is it the self directing fingers to hunt and peck along a keyboard, breaking now and again to make a hand grab that mug of coffee, to have its arm bring the mug up to sipping position, to make lips part, have the tongue push back, the throat swallow, etc.? Or at a

different point, the self that keeps its body sitting still in the uncomfortable seat of a creaky wooden chair because the setting is a seminar and therefore, a place where comfort must be sacrificed for the greater purpose of acquiring knowledge? Or later, is it the self that directs a polite, professional performance despite its tangible dislike for the administrator, bureaucrat, clerk or spouse with whom it is conversing? Or is it, on the whole, the self that imitates a parent or favorite actor, actress or teacher, or the self that speaks to itself, calls itself conscience and admonishes its own wayward desires? Experience in each of these cases is common, at times uninteresting and at bottom, universal. The self as we understand it exists in our bodies, in our social roles and performances, in history, in our spiritual lives, etc. We cannot sufficiently account for all that data, each instantiation or function and application of self, with a single claim or concept, much less a single term, any more than Giovanni Gentile could stop a bullet with his thoughts—or even see it coming.

## II. Diachronics

It doesn't take the death of a solipsist to "prove" his philosophy was flawed. As far back as can be traced, 'solipsism' has always carried a negative connotation and has been used in reference to a "wrong" belief or attitude.

The term derives from the Latin *solī-*, a learned borrowing from *sōlus*, meaning "solitary" or "alone" and *ipse*, meaning "self," thus it resembles in form the Latin phrase *sōlus ipse*, "oneself alone".

It appears 'solipsism' was specifically coined to disparage the un-Christian-like disposition towards egoism, selfishness and elitism. The earliest known use of a cognate appeared in Giulio Clemente Scotti's 1652 play entitled *La Monarchie des solipses*, a satire on the Society of Jesus depicting a kingdom of self-seekers and egoists. The play was popular enough that for some time after, French Jesuits were disparagingly referred to as *solipsistes*.<sup>4</sup>

The first recorded use of 'solipsism' in English occurred over two centuries later and is attributed to

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<sup>4</sup> See entry in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vols. 7 & 8, p. 488.

A. C. Fraser, who associated the term with the Kantian concept of moral egoism. In *Selections from Berkeley* (1874), Fraser wrote:

Ueberweg suggests that Berkeley's reasoning implies that we can know only our own notions of what we call other spirits—thus leading, by a *reductio ad absurdum*, to Egoism or Solipsism.<sup>5</sup>

Breaking somewhat from its earliest meaning, there were some scholars who regarded the concept of solipsism as more than an absurd conclusion. The same year Fraser's work appeared, Henry Sidgwick published *The Methods of Ethics*, in which he compared ethical systems based on utilitarianism, intuitionism and egoism. Of the latter, Sidgwick wrote:

[I]f we are to be guided by another's experience, we require to be convinced not only that he is generally accurate in observing, analysing, and comparing his sensations, but also that his relative susceptibility to the different kinds of pleasure and pain in question coincides with our own. If he is unpractised in introspective observation, it is possible that he may mistake even the external conditions of his own happiness; and so the communication of his experience may be altogether misleading. But however accurately he has analysed and determined the causes of his feelings, that similar causes would produce similar effects in us must always be uncertain.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> OED, vol. XV, p. 975.

<sup>6</sup> From *The Methods of Ethics*, Bk. 2, Chap. 3, Sec. 7.



Sidgwick concluded that intuitionism and utilitarianism could be integrated into a single ethical system, but that no rational explanation could be found for preferring it to egoism. However unpleasant the notion of egoism may have seemed, an apology was possible because the concept of solipsism, despite its *prima facie* absurdity, was firmly lodged in the logic of modern skepticism. Fraser's characterization of a *reductio ad absurdum* held true inductively, but to many, the solipsist claim was logically unassailable. Case in point: throwing a rock at the solipsist and thereby making him duck wouldn't necessarily prove he was wrong. Ducking may have spoken to the solipsist's frailty and survival instincts, but a skeptical line of reasoning could quickly show it plausible how the solipsist might duck and still maintain a valid argument.

Generally however, solipsism has retained its implication of wayward thinking. As one scholar noted in the late nineteenth century, "if not inconceivable,

[solipsism] is in the highest degree incredible."<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, the term 'solipsism' continued to be used synonymously with moral egoism: "They [presumably young people] should not be made self-centered and solipsistic at an age when altruism ought to have its golden day."<sup>8</sup>

The last major philosopher to harbor any sympathy for the concept of solipsism was the British idealist F. H. Bradley, who, in 1897, provided the clearest delineation of the solipsistic claim:

I cannot transcend experience, and experience must be my experience. From this it follows that nothing beyond my self exists, for what is experience is its (the self 's) states.<sup>9</sup>

As Bradley's absolute idealism fell into disfavor among British analytic philosophers, the concept of solipsism was irrevocably recast as an unconstructive end and the term came to be used as an implication of or tendency toward the idealists' unintended results. The analysts' counterparts in the continental tradition, who more or less inherited solipsism from

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<sup>7</sup> A. Barratt. See OED, vol. XV, p. 975.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 976.

<sup>9</sup> Selection from *Appearance and Reality* as quoted in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, p. 553.

the idealists, considered solipsism an awkward byproduct of relativism and subjectivism taken to skeptical extremes. Thus during the twentieth century, the term 'solipsism' devolved, referring to a vague and neglected family of notions, each of which appeared to promote the self as the sum total of reality.

The term as it is generally used today has become something of a straw man, amounting to little more than a criticism concerning the overemphasis of mental states. To say philosopher x has 'solipsistic' views is tantamount to observing x has placed himself in an embarrassing predicament. The concept of solipsism continues to be regarded negatively, a view any vigilant thinker would take care to avoid. Take, for example, A. C. Grayling's comments on Berkeley's critics (such as the one cited above):

Berkeley's habit of saying that things exist 'in the mind' has led uncritical readers to suppose he means that objects exist only in one's head, which is what a subjective idealist or solipsist might try to hold. Berkeley's idealism, whether or not it is otherwise defensible, is at least not quite so unstable a view.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> From A. C. Grayling's article, "Epistemology" in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, p. 56.

Likewise, Brian Magee criticizes P. M. S. Hacker's reading (or non-reading) of Schopenhauer:

Mr. [P. M. S.] Hacker's non-acquaintance with transcendental idealism leads him to confuse it systematically with solipsism, and this in turn leads him to suppose both that Schopenhauer was a sort of solipsist and that the theme of solipsism is of central significance in the early philosophy of Wittgenstein.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Richard Rorty interprets the line of argument that leads to the solipsist's claim:

[W]hen we try to go from: (1) We know our minds better than we know anything else; to (2) We could know all about our minds even if we knew nothing else; to (3) Knowing whether something has a mind is a matter of knowing it as it knows itself; then we can never say we should not be solipsists.<sup>12</sup>

Philosophers since Descartes have meant to say 'we should not be solipsists.' At the same time, many have unintentionally bolstered the solipsist claim and helped to develop meanings for the term 'solipsism' beyond its original association with moral egoism. As it stands, there are no less than three types of 'solipsism' listed in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of the self: the original notion of self-seeking associated

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<sup>11</sup> Magee, p. 336.

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, pp. 107-108.

with moral egoism; the epistemological notion that the self is the limit of human knowledge; and the metaphysical or ontological notion where the self constitutes the whole of reality or existence.

### III. Philosophical Development

As a mode of ridiculing ethical and religious foibles or, more likely, the personal qualities of those held in some form of contempt, the term 'solipsism' was originally associated with a concept that served as an indictment against those who were perceived to subscribe to baser moral precepts. Neither the word nor the concept has ever entirely shed this feature, this element of caricature and incredulity, so it should come as no surprise that there has never been a self-proclaimed solipsist. It's doubtful whether even Giovanni Gentile would have willingly accepted the label.

Lacking any major proponent, elements of solipsism nonetheless crept into epistemology, metaphysics and ontology. These spread quickly, their combined philosophical lives thus far spanning a little over two of the western tradition's twenty five centuries. Each strain bears indelible Cartesian marks, making solipsism, in terms of the historical backdrop from which it emerged, an unquestionably modern phenomenon.

## 1. Descartes (1641)

'Modern' denotes the era that began, roughly around the seventeenth century, with a wide scale break from medieval tradition: a rejection of the scholastic practice of reconciling the past with the present. The shift in perspective is fundamental, for rather than continue the custom of smoothing over inconsistencies within the western body of knowledge, the modern disposition was to wipe the slate clean and to start over. Francis Bacon, in his preface to *Novum Organum* (1620), called for "the entire work of the understanding [to] be commenced afresh."<sup>13</sup> Twenty-one years later, Descartes presented to the faculty of the Sorbonne his *Meditations*, echoing the sentiment "to build anew from the foundation."<sup>14</sup>

In setting his foundation, Descartes began with the *cogito* argument and ended with God. Running the gauntlet of classical skepticism (misperception, dream world/delusion, interminable error), the *cogito* emerged

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<sup>13</sup> From the selection of *Novum Organum* reprinted in Baird & Kaufmann, vol. III, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> From *Meditations on First Philosophy*, p. 58

as the sole indication of epistemic certainty. From this rather narrow premise, Descartes built his worldview, and he did it quickly, that is, in relatively few moves. As a consequence, his notion of the self was solitary, spiritual and assured of its own existence. That in itself wasn't such a radical idea; building a philosophy up from the *cogito* was.

Descartes' philosophy must have seemed new and revolutionary precisely because it had an intrinsically solipsistic bent. As William Bluhm aptly portrays it, Descartes made his discoveries "curled up by himself in soliloquy in the corner of a warm room," a stark contrast to "Plato's search for knowledge through dialogue and dialectic—social methods of knowing."<sup>15</sup>

Of course, Descartes never intended for the *cogito* to take center stage. In the quest for an indubitable foundation of knowledge, he arrived at the *cogito* argument by using skepticism as a method, not a doctrine. Consequently, he didn't pursue the logical limits of the *cogito*. He didn't have to; it had served

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. From Bluhm's essay, "Political Theory and Ethics," p. 308.



it's purpose as a the primary step toward showing how much we really do know. Thus it would be impossible to argue whether anything like the solipsist claim ever even occurred to Descartes, whether it prickled at the back of his mind as he wrote the *Meditations*. If he had privately carried the *cogito* argument forward to a conclusion where, for example, the existence of things beyond the self also subsisted in the act of thinking, then the third meditation might fairly be criticized as employing a *deus ex machina* to avoid solipsism. But as the bulk of the *Meditations* is dedicated to building up rather than tearing down, it appears more likely Descartes simply didn't appreciate the full repercussions his methodic doubt would have on philosophy. It's fairly clear he didn't find the skeptical arguments he employed to be particularly persuasive. They were, in the end, merely a philosophical conceit.

Thus for Descartes, God was the beneficent agent through which man can first posit and ultimately deduce the existence of an external world. The *cogito* was

simply a means to arriving at that understanding. Whatever Descartes' motivation was for appealing to God, i.e., whether we read him as truly pious or simply smart enough not to provoke church censors or some combination of both, the new foundation for human knowledge wasn't all that new. It was, as it had been for Aquinas an Augustine, God. As a result, Descartes' worldview would prove less enduring than his method or strategy.

## **2. Locke (1690)**

In hindsight, it now seems inevitable that modern philosophers had to focus their attention on the status and function of God in order to break free from their medieval forebears. Descartes had, at bottom, merely restated a syncretistic account of God in the Neoplatonic system of innate ideas, a view not far removed from medieval accounts. Thus if God was no longer called upon to provide the bridge between subjective consciousness and the objective or intersubjective world, or as Locke would have it, if

there were no agency to place innate ideas of the world into our minds at birth, then we would be left with a *tabula rasa* needing to be filled by experience:

Our observation, employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking.<sup>16</sup>

In Locke's view, God had endowed man with an understanding and with the capacity for knowledge. It was incumbent upon the individual to develop these so as to carry on with daily life and recognize one's duties and obligations to God and to others. The undertaking would always be fraught with difficulty. There would be those who gave up, lazily following the dictates of others without making the most of their God-given abilities. In addition, Locke conceded that there were in fact limits to our knowledge; that error and delusion may keep us from achieving universal comprehension or absolute certainty. But this was not a matter of grave concern; God had seen fit that our knowledge suited our needs. The task then was to

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<sup>16</sup> From *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.1.2.) reprinted in Baird and Kaufmann, vol. III, p. 177.

arrange our lives and govern our thoughts, actions and opinions accordingly:

We should not then perhaps be so forward, out of an affection of universal knowledge, to raise questions, and perplex ourselves and others with disputes about things to which our understandings are not suited.<sup>17</sup>

Locke was providing a comprehensive response to skepticism, arguing from the position that many skeptical arguments were, in practice, groundless and arbitrary, presenting no real threat to our knowledge and beliefs. Descartes' 'evil deceiver' was one example. At the same time, Locke tacitly accepted the Cartesian view of an independently existing self that acquired concepts from its own internal, mental processes. Ideas came from the experience of sensation or reflection, the latter being "the perception of the operations of our mind within us."<sup>18</sup> This "internal sense" furnished the understanding with conceptual modes "which could not be had from without," such as thinking, perceiving, doubting, believing and willing. Through reflection, man had the capacity to form ideas

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. (Intro.4.), p. 173

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. (II.1.4), p. 177

"wholly within himself."<sup>19</sup> The mind had no immediate object other than its own ideas. Thus when Locke stated that knowledge was "nothing but the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy, of any of our ideas,"<sup>20</sup> he unwittingly sanctioned a basis for solipsism. It's fair to characterize the result as inadvertent because Locke was clearly not endorsing the solipsist claim: "we have the knowledge of our own existence by intuition; of the existence of God by demonstration; and of other things by sensation."<sup>21</sup> There was for Locke a world on which our mind's ideas of things were based, comprised of a substratum or substance that gave rise to our experiences. But, he conceded, "it be certain we have no clear or distinct idea of that thing we suppose a support."<sup>22</sup> In other words, we could ultimately have no direct or complete knowledge of it.

Despite that last hitch, Locke was, if not entirely dismissive, certainly scathing enough in his

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pp. 177-8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid (IV.1.2), p. 221.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. (IV.9.2), p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. (II.23.4), p. 205.

criticism of skeptical claims to suggest that he saw no value in pursuing each argument to its limit. There was one exception: "if all be a dream, then he doth but dream that he makes the question, and so it is not much matter that a waking man should answer."<sup>23</sup> The real irony here is at Locke's expense, for in another inadvertent outcome, the attention he gave to skepticism helped to elevate it from a purely methodological device to the realm of problematic consideration. In other words, by addressing Descartes' doubts, Locke validated them as substantial.

### **3. Berkeley (1710)**

Neither Descartes nor Locke adopted any notion that the self was all that was extant or all that could be known. Yet, as a result of their combined efforts, a solipsistic impulse had caught hold in epistemology. The stage was thereby set for Berkeley to usher solipsism out of its latency and bring it to the philosophical fore, which, as we have seen, inspired

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. (IV.11.8), p. 233.

Fraser to present the term for the first time in recorded English.<sup>24</sup>

Berkeley was active at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a time when the notion of technology as the union of theory and practice served as archetype for the reconstruction of human knowledge. Science had promised to offer the keys to understanding the material world and there emerged two distinct approaches: one, following Bacon and representing an early empirical approach, intended that "the mind itself be... guided at every step; and the business done as if by machinery;"<sup>25</sup> the other, following Descartes and his emphasis on mathematics and geometry, represented the rationalist line. At the same time, the emergence of skepticism challenged claims of any and all forms of knowledge about the material world. Berkeley was prescient insofar as he saw the threat of these developments combining to produce an atheistic metaphysics. Thus in an effort to win over those

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<sup>24</sup> As far as the OED is concerned.

<sup>25</sup> From *Novum Organum* reprinted in Baird & Kaufmann, vol. III, p. 4.

"tainted by Skepticism,"<sup>26</sup> he set out to eradicate the grounds for any skeptical argument by attacking the prevalent conception of a mechanistic world lying behind the veil of the senses.

In the preface to *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (rev. ed. 1734), Berkeley asked his readers to suspend judgment until they had carefully read through the entire work, fearing that otherwise he would be grossly misinterpreted and "be charged with the most absurd consequences."<sup>27</sup> Here again he proved to be prescient. Accepting Locke's empiricist doctrine, he identified a fundamental problem: if all we can know are the ideas in our mind, then how do we know there is an external world giving rise to our ideas? At bottom, Berkeley took issue with Locke's conclusion regarding the state of the objective world, that it was comprised of "something"<sup>28</sup> and that that was the best characterization or account we could

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<sup>26</sup> From Baird and Kaufmann's complete reprinting of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Preface), vol. III, p. 292.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> From Baird and Kaufmann's selection of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.23.2), vol. III, p. 205.



make for it. For Berkeley, this was a direct path to skepticism. His solution, as it is commonly conceived, was to do away with the external world, making the radical claim that there is no substratum or, more precisely, no matter.

As he had feared, critics took a disparaging view of this position, most notably Samuel Johnson who dismissively pronounced, "I refute Berkeley thus" and kicked a stone. But Johnson was mistaken; Berkeley had never argued against the existence of the rock or the sensation Johnson felt in his toe. Rather, he claimed the rock and the sensation were immaterial; that they were a collection of sensible qualities, that sensible qualities were ideas, that ideas only existed when they were being perceived and that therefore, they didn't exist apart from the Johnson's perceptions.

At the heart of Berkeley's immaterialism lay what has come to be called his master argument: "when we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own

ideas."<sup>29</sup> The argument stems from a direct attack on Locke's attribution of primary and secondary qualities to the ideas of sensation:

All our ideas, sensations, notions... are visibly inactive—there is nothing of power or agency included in them... it follows then that there is nothing in them but what is perceived: but whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflection, will not perceive in them any power or activity... the very being of an idea implies passiveness and inertness in it, insomuch that it is impossible for an idea to do anything, or, strictly speaking, to be the cause of anything... Whence it plainly follows that extension, figure, and motion cannot be the cause of our sensations. To say, therefore, that these are the effects of powers resulting from the configuration, number, motion, and size of corpuscles, must certainly be false.<sup>30</sup>

Since Locke's substratum was unintelligible and could only be rendered through supposition, Berkeley was able to argue it away by claiming primary qualities attributed to objects were inseparable from secondary qualities: "I deny that I can abstract from one another, or conceive separately, those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated."<sup>31</sup> For instance, the notion of an apple's extension was only

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<sup>29</sup> *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (§23) in Baird and Kaufmann, vol. III, p. 307.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. (§25), p. 308.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. (§10), p. 295.

knowable by its shape as defined by colors in the visual field and by its solidity appreciated as weight and consistency in the tactile field, etc. For Locke, secondary qualities were "nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities."<sup>32</sup> Thus when Berkeley did away with primary qualities, he essentially cut ties to the material world.

The significance Berkeley had on the development of a formal notion of solipsism can be felt more acutely by restating his master argument in negative terms: one cannot conceive of unperceived things. As Howard Robinson explains:

[B]y parity of reason, one could prove the impossibility of conceiving of ideas on other people's minds or of ideas had at other times: one could prove, that is, solipsism of the present moment.<sup>33</sup>

Robinson proceeds with an attempt to rescue Berkeley by pointing out that the argument relies on treating ideas as images and not as intentional, i.e., not as

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<sup>32</sup> Baird and Kaufmann's selection of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.8.10), vol. III, p. 187.

<sup>33</sup> From Robinson's chapter on Berkeley in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, p. 564.

referring to anything beyond themselves. An image, he writes, "is only a pattern of sensible qualities and such qualities are not about anything but themselves."<sup>34</sup> If, however, we accept some connection between what can be conceived (ideas) and what can be imagined (images), then we may not be able to know/conceive unperceived things, but we can know them in the weaker sense of imagining them.

Lacking the benefits of Kantian equivocation and Santayana's refinement of skepticism, Berkeley relied on his piety as a soon-to-be bishop (and, as it were, the philosophical convention of his time), invoking God to staunch the extremities of reason:

When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses; the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my own will. There is therefore some other Will or Spirit that produces them.<sup>35</sup>

God was the immaterial cause of experience, not man, meaning Berkeley was not in the strict sense a

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 565.

<sup>35</sup> *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (§23) in Baird and Kaufmann, vol. III, p. 308.

solipsist. Still, he had for all intents and purposes absolved solipsism of its vernacular roots. The one-time slur would come to be used as a technical term, filling a need that Berkeley had in large part created.

#### **4. Hume (1748)**

One final step was required for the development of the solipsistic claim as we know it: the exclusion of God from an active role. Descartes, Locke and Berkeley had conceived of the self as an independent entity and each had used the principle of causality to prove the existence of God. Once established, God was demonstrated as the necessary ground for certain ideas within the self, most notably the concept of a world outside the self.

Hume assailed the postulation of God as a mainstay against skepticism by questioning the principle of causality. Observing that "all reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of cause and effect," he argued "knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by

reasonings a priori; but arises entirely from experience."<sup>36</sup> Even then, though it may be natural to believe our experiences are girded by systematic causality, there were no "infallible"<sup>37</sup> grounds for asserting a connection between cause and effect. We see one event follow another and, as a matter of habit, custom or natural belief, relate the two. A moderate notional challenge reveals there is no evidence of a necessary bond between observable events, nor is there evidence that each and every event must have a cause. Causal inferences and the causal principle are superficial as such and thereby contestable.

In an attempt to deflect critics, Hume dedicated the last part of the *Enquiry* to taking the edge off his skepticism. We are all skeptics to some degree, he argued. The question becomes, "how far is it possible to push these principles of doubt and uncertainty?"<sup>38</sup> Not as far as Descartes, apparently, since Descartes' doubt, despite being methodological, resulted in a

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<sup>36</sup> *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (§4 Pt.1) in Baird and Kaufmannn, vol. III, p. 356.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. (§7 Pt.1), p. 373.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. (§12 Pt.1), p. 414.

circular argument (establishing certainty by way of reason, which must therefore presume reason to be trustworthy). For Hume, skepticism is only useful when its excesses are mitigated and corrected by "common sense and reflection." Once again, however, the philosopher's intent and the ultimate outcome was not, as Hume would appreciate, necessarily related. Skepticism would prove hard to reign in once it had been employed so effectively and defended so eloquently.

With the pieces now in place, the seeds of solipsism thus sown, the weed needed only a little fertilizer to grow.

## **5. Kant (1780)**

Prior to Kant, the *cogito* or conscious self was consistent with the world around it, in the sense that it was in a sort of perpetual receiving mode. For Descartes, God inspired us to reflection; for Locke, experience filled the *tabula rasa*; for Berkeley, ideas pervaded the spirit; for Hume, impressions and ideas

formed perception. Kant, on the other hand, was the first to emphasize the active role played by the self as a 'unity of consciousness'. The world appeared as it did because of the configuration of our perceptions, concepts and judgments. Human beings were predisposed to forming ideas of the supersensible, of God and soul and the like, but instead of recognizing these as creative renditions, we attributed to them phony qualities such as objectivity. The metaphysical systems constructed around such notions were thereby replete with snares and self-deceptions. In an ironic turn of the Cartesian circle, reason, constructing its metaphysical masterworks, was Descartes' 'evil deceiver.'

Of course, Kant didn't disparage reason as evil, only misguided. There were limits to our theoretical knowledge that we were bound to run up against. But the practical application of reason in the moral realm was, in fact, man's highest achievement. As the world was shaped by the disposition of mind, our behavior in it, the manner in which we made our way, was the more



profound consideration. So while reason supplied the efficient means for us to do and get what we wanted, in those moments when man acted on principle instead of prudence or mere desire, he evinced his real, moral worth.

The animating force of Kant's idealism was intended to "deny knowledge to make room for faith."<sup>39</sup> Belief in God, moral duty, respect for the autonomy of others, these were matters to which evidence, truth and explanation were inapplicable; where faith replaced certainty. Kant's transcendental enquiries were, by definition, studies at the limits of human knowledge, the points of solvency where what was known began to fade and what was believed began to appear. In other words, grand exercises in Hume's academic skepticism. If we credit Hume for being the first to take God out of philosophy, we have to credit Kant for completing the enlightenment equation, filling the void left by God and certainty with man and, inevitably, man's doubts about the world around him.

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<sup>39</sup> From the selection of *Critique of Pure Reason* (Preface to the Second Edition, p. xxx) in Baird and Kaufmann, vol. III, p. 498.

Kant therefore animated the solipsistic claim on several fronts. First, in terms of an overall attitude toward human understanding, if nothing was certain, in the traditional, philosophical sense of the term, then anything was possible. Belief in the solipsistic claim or any other form of skepticism could be taken as a matter of faith, as credible a possibility as the belief in God. It's unlikely Kant would have accepted this proposition but it is, nonetheless, one aspect of his legacy. Second, experience as the synthesized contents of consciousness was distinct for individuals. The construct of the mind was universal in the sense that each person possessed the same basic system of categories, concepts and schemata, but the manner in which each mind coalesced forms of judgment was a mark of the individual. Finally, in an echo of Locke, there was a rational order in the noumenal realm upon which rational beings could willfully act, but the things-in-themselves remained unintelligible to us. Traditional dissatisfaction with this last factor would lead, as it did for Berkeley against Locke, to the pursuit of

immaterialist doctrines. Now however, with Kant's notion of the active self in place of the receptive *cogito*, immaterialism would take the final form of idealism.

#### IV. The 'I' Century

The greater portion of the nineteenth century was spent responding to the writings of Immanuel Kant. His immediate successor, Johann Fichte, saw the only way to avoid Kant's problems with the thing-in-itself was to discard entirely the notion of a noumenal realm. There was, Fichte held, only the phenomenal world of experience, a construct of the independent self. But as with Kant, the self or 'I' was, at its best, an ethical agent. In order to be ethical, there had to be other 'I's with whom to be obliged, be duty-bound and stand in relation:

To the question, whether, in deed and in fact, such a world exists as that which I represent to myself, I can give no answer more fundamental, more raised above all doubt, than this: - I have, most certainly and truly, these determinate duties, which announce themselves to me as duties towards certain objects, to be fulfilled by means of certain materials.<sup>40</sup>

When it came to knowing the other 'I' and what Fichte called the non-ego, i.e., everything outside the self, the best one could hope for was practical belief or as he called it, faith, which was modeled after Kant's

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<sup>40</sup> From *The Vocation of Man*, Book III, reprinted in *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, pp. 419.

practical reason and the common sense propounded by Berkeley and Hume. Founded upon the exercises of everyday life, Fichte retained Kantian moral overtones in the sense that faith was the guiding principle for making our way in the world:

So has it been with all men who have ever seen the light of this world. Without being conscious of it they apprehend, through faith alone, all the reality which has an existence for them; and this faith forces itself on them simultaneously with their existence; - it is born with them. How could it be otherwise? If in mere knowledge, in mere perception and reflection, there is no ground for regarding our mental presentations as more than mere pictures which necessarily pass before our view, why do we yet regard them as more than this, and assume, as their foundation, something which exists independently of all presentation?<sup>41</sup>

Fichte perceived 'I' as the union of an active subject and the non-ego world around it. The totality of 'I's interacting with their respective and often times overlapping non-egos made up the moral order of the world. The moral order, or Absolute Ego, was the transcendental source of our faith and, as such, what we were actually referring to when we spoke of 'God'.

Though he never expressed it as such, Fichte is regarded as having taken an important step toward

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 412-13.

sanctioning the solipsist claim. His system did not confine reality, existence or knowledge to a single 'I'. Rather, it was multi-subjective, the 'I' referring to any self using the singular first-person pronoun. Philosophers, however, would come to adopt this multi-subjective model when trying to formulate a notion of solipsism. As C. D. Rollins reports in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

However paradoxical this requirement may seem or actually be, and however it is to be accommodated, it is a feature that has not been denied in any formulation of solipsism.<sup>42</sup>

The reason the multi-subjective model has "not been denied" is largely attributable to the fact that no philosopher has ever asserted the solipsistic position in the first place. Not even Fichte, who we may justifiably credit with framing solipsism as we allegedly understand it, would make the solipsistic claim. His argument against solipsism was demonstrable by the trivial fact that such a claim could be made, that the person making the claim would be making it to someone else, the act of communication undercutting

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<sup>42</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vols. 7 & 8, p. 488.

what was being communicated, etc. Of course, the mere exhibit of life's common, everyday activities was nothing more than experience, the product of the synthesizing powers of the mind, a detail that Fichte could not escape and the one that ultimately led him to regard solipsism as theoretically irrefutable.

At its very inception, then, the notion we have come to call 'solipsism' actually wasn't, in the strictest sense, solipsism. Rather, it was the weaker thesis of subjective idealism.

For the rest of the 'I' century, the so-called problem of solipsism would loom large. Kant had cleaved the subject-object schism; Fichte made it wide. In an effort to follow the course thus set, idealists would have to scratch their way between naïve realism and solipsism. Having passed over the firmer ground once held by the substratum and monads, nature and the noumenal realm, the search was on for that in the autonomous mind from which knowledge, science and ethics could derive. In a few short years, Fichte's notion of faith or practical knowledge would be seen as

little more than a tentative step. His colleague at Jena, W. J. Schelling, looked to art and the aesthetic as the model for the union of subject and object, of soul and nature. Schelling's colleague and one-time friend, Hegel, generalized the idealist principle by positing the wholly unconditioned *Geist* or spirit, the primitive unity or identity from which all opposites sprang. Hegel's system proved too optimistic for Schopenhauer, compelling him to replace *Geist* with a non-rational, amoral Will whose essence amounted to nothing more than a meaningless struggle to exist.

Idealism, a problematic term in its own right, may therefore be characterized by its construction of an Absolute Unity that, as part of the process, recognizes any possibility as an existing thing. Rom Harré observes how German idealism in particular continues to stimulate philosophy because of its notoriously obscure presentations. Conversely, Harré writes, "the version of idealism that developed in England has the virtue and vulnerability of relative clarity."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *One Thousand Years of Philosophy*, p. 250.



The name F. H. Bradley is synonymous with British idealism and, as noted in section II above, he was the last major philosopher to concede the seeming unassailability of the solipsist claim. He was also the first and last philosopher to believe that he could construct something like a proof for the Absolute. His argument ran as follows: if perception was an internal relation, constitutive of the mind and the object it perceived, then the object was, to some degree, a mental construct; the act of knowing somehow affecting the object. Since the object was not wholly independent of the mind, a coherence theory of truth was more suitable for making accounts of the world, whereby the belief about the world and the world itself were both mental entities and logically related as such. The notion of world as an independent realm of self-existing, material things that could be grasped by the immaterial mind was, for Bradley, a contradiction.

Though Bradley's monism prevented him from pursuing a solipsistic theory, it's no accident that 'solipsism' emerged as a technical term at the high

point of idealist thinking in Britain. As the passages cited in section II reveal, 'solipsism' was so closely associated with 'idealism' that the terms were treated as almost synonymous. By definition however, idealists relied on some form of Absolute, which again by definition, implied the totality of individual things and/or minds. For the religiously inclined, God was the Absolute. For the followers of Hegel, the Absolute was a condition perpetually realizing itself in the human race, perceivable as the progression of *Geist* in history. Schopenhauer's Absolute—Will—was neither beneficial nor receptive and therefore had to be overcome. The discernible trend here is a shift toward science, from latent deism to Bradley's analytical approach, the reduction of metaphysics to proofs. But the idealist advance toward science proved too little, too late. The notion of an Absolute had already come under attack on a number of fronts. Feuerbach had countered Hegel with materialism. Comte had laid out a positivist approach to social science. Marx argued that any idea of the Absolute ultimately devalued

humanity. Mill had recently improved on Bentham's utilitarianism, blunting any sense of unconditional moral duty. Finally, Schopenhauer, who defended idealism while blistering contemporary idealists with contempt, ultimately turned idealism on its head, or at least back around to Kant's noumenal realm. A beleaguered notion of the Absolute would prove worse than useless, for without grounding, there is nothing to hold the system together and idealism does in the end spin into solipsism.

The emergence of the term 'solipsism' in the literature reveals isolated presentiments against idealism; a general attack underway, drawn from any number of sources. Critics who cast dispersions of 'solipsism' were of the mind that idealism, though it was adopting aspects of scientific enquiry, was still too entrenched in what Comte had called the metaphysical or abstract stage of theoretical knowledge. Removing the Absolute would therefore accelerate philosophy into the final, scientific stage.

But at the close of the 'I' century, the  
'solipsists' would not be left behind.

## V. Wittgenstein

The demise of idealism followed the philosophical emergence of Frege, Russell and Moore and, perhaps more pertinently, may be located within the general trauma left in the wake of the First World War. For a short period of time, the notion of solipsism followed suit, disappearing, as one might expect, from the philosophical landscape. Then, European philosophy, in the midst of its various turns toward language, analysis, and phenomenology, was caught unawares by Wittgenstein, when, for the first time in the history of philosophy, he affirmed the solipsist claim. The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* declares, "what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself manifest."<sup>44</sup> Similar entries appeared in Wittgenstein's earlier notebooks, some of which made remarks in the *Tractatus* seem moderate by comparison: "there really is only one world soul, which I for preference call my soul and as which alone I conceive what I call the souls of others."<sup>45</sup> This was

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<sup>44</sup> *Tractatus* (Pears and McGuinness translation), 5.62.

<sup>45</sup> *Notebooks: 1914-1916*, 49 (10).

the "early" Wittgenstein, Russell's protégé... the radical idealist?

In his introduction to the *Tractatus*, Russell cited the "somewhat curious discussion of solipsism,"<sup>46</sup> but for the most part seemed undisturbed by Wittgenstein's pronouncements. At that point in his career, Russell was concerned more with the account of propositions and tautologies, Wittgenstein's primary focus at Cambridge and the area where the student had already prompted the teacher to reconsider his position.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Russell's own opinions regarding solipsism were hardly substantial. As a matter of principle, he had already adopted correspondence over Bradley's coherence and had reduced the *cogito* to the momentary receptacle of sense data:

[I]f we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, we shall be left alone in a desert—it may be that the whole outer world is nothing but a dream, and that we alone exist. But although it cannot be strictly proved to be false, there is not the slightest reason to suppose that it is true.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Tractatus* (Ogden translation), p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Russell credits Wittgenstein with pointing out the importance of 'tautology' for a definition of mathematics in the last footnote to *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*.

<sup>48</sup> From *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 17.

Any question of other minds was simply begging the existence of matter. Consequently, the word 'private' was destined to have a brilliant career in analytic philosophy:

We must, if possible, find in our own purely private experiences, characteristics which show, or tend to show, that there are in the world things other than ourselves and our private experiences.<sup>49</sup>

It's understandable how a consensus has grown among Wittgenstein's biographers and latter-day adherents that Russell had simply missed the point regarding solipsism. Wittgenstein himself partially encouraged that view. Having received the manuscript of the *Tractatus* sometime in July 1919, Russell responded with a series of comments and questions. To these Wittgenstein replied, "I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop[osition]s is only a corollary."<sup>50</sup> He goes on to explain:

The main point is the theory of what can be expressed, by prop[osition]s—i.e., by language—(and, which comes to the same, what can be

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>50</sup> From *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, p.71.

thought) and what cannot be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown; which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.

In her *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, Elizabeth Anscombe cited this letter as evidence for the notion that Wittgenstein's views on solipsism and other things that "could not be expressed but only shown" held the key to the *Tractatus*; "the things that would be true if they could be said are obviously important."<sup>51</sup> To Anscombe, the import of what was unsayable about solipsism in particular was the manner in which logic shows its transcendental limits:

That is why, having said at 5.6, 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world', Wittgenstein gives as the first comment on this pronouncement a number of remarks on logic... The argument is: 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world; but all languages have one and the same logic, and its limits are those of the world; therefore, the limits of my world and of the world are one and the same; therefore, the world is my world.'<sup>52</sup>

The repellent style and apparent prolixity of the argument here were not wholly the fault of Anscombe. She was struggling, along with Wittgenstein, to fit a strict definition of 'solipsism' into the gaps left by

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<sup>51</sup> *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, p. 162.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.



the idealist's multi-subjective model. The problem, as Wittgenstein would later state in the *Blue Book*, had to do with the philosopher's mistaken belief "that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications."<sup>53</sup> Up to this point in philosophy, the only application of the term 'solipsism' had been as a form of negative criticism, an allegation made of the tendency or direction toward which a philosophic position was perceived to be headed. In every case, however, the position regarded as 'solipsistic' had claimed the subsistence of several 'I's. Wittgenstein, either through a misinterpretation of the term as it was actually being used or in a conscious attempt to take solipsism literally, i.e., to "show" the "cardinal problem of philosophy," effectively created another sense of the term, as it were, the strict sense. The result was disastrous, for however the new sense of 'solipsism' came to be, it could never be reconciled with its former sense. Moreover, the solitary self could not get by in a Tractarian worldview:

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<sup>53</sup> *The Blue and the Brown Books*, p. 19.

The 'I' of this way of talking is not something that can be found as a mind or soul, a subject of consciousness, one among others; there is no such thing to be 'found' as the subject of consciousness in this sense. All that can be found is what consciousness is of, the contents of consciousness: 'I am my world' and 'The world and life are one'. Hence this 'I', whose language has the special position, is unique; the world described by this language is just the real world: 'Thoroughly thought out, solipsism coincides with pure realism.'<sup>54</sup>

Here again the remarks can be read, depending on one's allegiance, as either the results of a grave error or the true testing of the limits of language and thought. In either case, they are largely incoherent. Anscombe thus tries to salvage her interpretation—and perhaps Wittgenstein's as well—by way of an appeal to Schopenhauer's influence:

It is not possible to understand this passage unless one has a good deal of sympathy with solipsism. We should remember that Wittgenstein had been much impressed by Schopenhauer as a boy; many traces of this sympathy are to be found in the *Tractatus*. Probably no one who reads the opening of *The World as Will and Idea*: 'The world is my idea', without any responsiveness, will be able to enter into Wittgenstein's thought here.<sup>55</sup>

This is somewhat misleading, given Schopenhauer's attitude toward solipsism. It's questionable whether

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<sup>54</sup> *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, p. 168.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Schopenhauer himself would have wanted to "enter into"

Wittgenstein's thought on the matter:

Theoretical egoism, of course, can never be refuted by proofs, yet in philosophy it has never been positively used otherwise than a skeptical sophism, i.e., for the sake of appearance. As a serious conviction, on the other hand, it could be found only in a madhouse; as such it then need not so much a refutation as a cure. Therefore we... shall regard this skeptical argument of theoretical egoism, which here confronts us, as a small frontier fortress. Admittedly the fortress is impregnable, but the garrison can never sally forth from it, and therefore we can pass it by and leave it in our rear without danger.<sup>56</sup>

Sympathetic to this view, Wittgenstein's biographers have, wisely perhaps, downplayed his treatment of solipsism as something of an idiosyncrasy. As Brian McGuinness demonstrates, even passing references can quickly run awry. Beginning with what seems to be the judicious observation that Wittgenstein "had a temperamental and philosophical hankering after solipsism: it was somehow to be accommodated, not quite dismissed,"<sup>57</sup> McGuinness' account subsequently falters:

[Wittgenstein] hurt his leg and felt that it lamed his thoughts. This attitude was part of his solipsism, which in his case was not an

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<sup>56</sup> From *The World as Will and Representation* (i, 104) as quoted in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, p. 122.

<sup>57</sup> From *Wittgenstein: A Life (Young Ludwig 1889-1921)*, p. 106.

intellectual exercise but a moral and mystical attitude.<sup>58</sup>

That we are left with the question of whether and to what degree Wittgenstein was in fact a solipsist demonstrates, in the very least, the biographer felt it unnecessary to adopt his subject's accommodating view. More likely, he simply couldn't. Either instance raises the palpable question as to whose view of solipsism is actually being represented.

The same query may put to Anscombe. In the beginning of her *Introduction*, she wrote, "Wittgenstein's philosophical ancestry... specifically his 'solipsism'... will be better understood in the light of Schopenhauer than of any other philosopher."<sup>59</sup> The use of single quotes around the term foreshadows an underlying incoherence. Is she referring to the term or the concept of solipsism? Does she mean to imply that Wittgenstein wasn't a solipsist, despite his comments, or that solipsism wasn't the proper term for what he was talking about, despite his use of that term? Perhaps, after all, she did in fact mean to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 228.

<sup>59</sup> *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, p. 12.

indicate that Wittgenstein had done something new with solipsism, and had thereby earned the possessive; it was his own brand.

One way to clear up the confusion may be to back off the notion that Wittgenstein was affirming the solipsist claim and make the case instead that he was merely acknowledging, albeit in Tractarian terms, the theoretical irrefutability of solipsism. This would put him more directly in line with Schopenhauer and the German idealists going back to Fichte. But to make the argument plausible, Wittgenstein would have to be seen as constructing a metaphysics that was more closely affiliated with logic, such as Bradley's, while still leaving any notion of truth outside the system. Logic would thereby take on the role of the Absolute. Anscombe argues this idealist interpretation (and for that matter, conversely, any realist interpretation) could only result from the neglect of Frege.<sup>60</sup> Here again, the attribution of an influence on Wittgenstein does not come without difficulty. Whereas one can only speculate as to how Schopenhauer might have received

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the *Tractatus*, extant letters leave little question as to Frege's reaction.

Wittgenstein attested that he was inspired by and, "indebted to Frege's great works."<sup>61</sup> For his part, however, Frege never fully appreciated his own influence: "if I have furthered your endeavors more than I thought I had, then I am very pleased to have done so."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Frege couldn't begin to understand the Tractarian project: "of the treatise itself I can offer no judgment, not because I am not in agreement with its contents, but rather because the content is too unclear to me."<sup>63</sup> So, in remembering Frege we must first acknowledge that the tendency to neglect Frege was started by Frege himself.

It must be noted, before considering how Frege might deter an idealist rendition of the *Tractatus*, that his logisict or foundationalist project originally emphasized mathematics, not logic, as the uber-language capable of encompassing both the non-intuitable and the

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<sup>61</sup> *Tractatus* (Pears and McGuinness translation), p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *The Duty of Genius*, p. 153.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175. In the letter to Russell cited above, Wittgenstein complained that Frege "doesn't understand a word of it."

intuitable. While we consider Frege the father of modern logic and one of the founders of analytic philosophy, his motive in *Begriffsschrift* (1879) was, as Michael Beaney points out, "not so much to improve on traditional logic for its own sake as to provide arithmetic with the strongest possible foundations."<sup>64</sup>

As Frege saw it, a crucial part of shoring up mathematics lay in developing a non-mathematical definition for natural numbers. He accomplished this by taking the technique of function-argumentation from mathematics and applying it to logical analysis, producing what we know today as predicate logic. Using the new method, he constructed a logical analysis of mathematical induction. In short order, the analysis of number took Frege outside the fields of math and logic, forcing him to consider epistemological principles, then ontology and ultimately, to form something like a metaphysics. Today his system may be variously described as modern (scientific) Platonism or logical idealism. Considering his tirade in

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<sup>64</sup> From Beaney's introduction to *The Frege Reader*, p. 3.

*Grundgesetze der Arithmetik* (1893), the latter

classification would have probably drawn Frege's ire:

Because the psychological logicians fail to recognize the possibility of the objective non-actual, they take concepts as ideas and thereby consign them to psychology... And thus a vacillation arises in the use of the word 'idea', appearing at one moment to refer to something that belongs to the mental life of an individual and that combines with other ideas with which it is associated, according to psychological laws, and at the next to something that confronts everyone in the same way, an owner of the idea being neither mentioned nor even merely presupposed. These two uses are incompatible; for the associations and combinations only happen in individual minds and only happen to something quite private to the individual, as his pleasure or pain... When will an end be put to this once and for all!<sup>65</sup>

The condition wherein a subject as "owner of the idea" is downplayed or not considered to be the primary operative force in even a small aspect of mental life begins to shed light on that part of Wittgenstein's remark at 5.64 which, significantly, Anscombe doesn't cite: "the 'I' in solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and there remains the reality coordinated with it."<sup>66</sup> Wittgenstein's portrayal of the shrinking 'I'

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<sup>65</sup> From "*Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*" reprinted in *The Frege Reader*, p. 205.

<sup>66</sup> *Tractatus* (C. K. Ogden translation), 5.64.



proceeds formulaically from Frege's early critique of syllogistic logic. In the attempt to locate his *Begriffsschrift* in the philosophical tradition, Frege naturally started by comparing his system with Boolean logic, which was prevalent at the time. Frege's criticism was basically that Boolean logic was too restrictive, shackled by the traditional subject-predicate relations. In "Boole's Logical Calculus and the *Begriffsschrift*" (1881), Frege wrote:

The real difference [between the two systems] is that I avoid [the Boolean] division into two parts... and give a homogeneous presentation of the lot. In Boole the two parts run alongside one another, so that one is like the mirror image of the other, but for that very reason stands in no organic relation to it.<sup>67</sup>

The "organic" feature of predicate logic involved the replacement of subject-predicate relations with generalized functions. To this day, Frege's insight is commended and he is credited for cleaning up logic with a purely objective, mathematical principle. But precision does not come without consequence. The traditional notion of a logical subject was swept up into the function, effectively disappearing in its

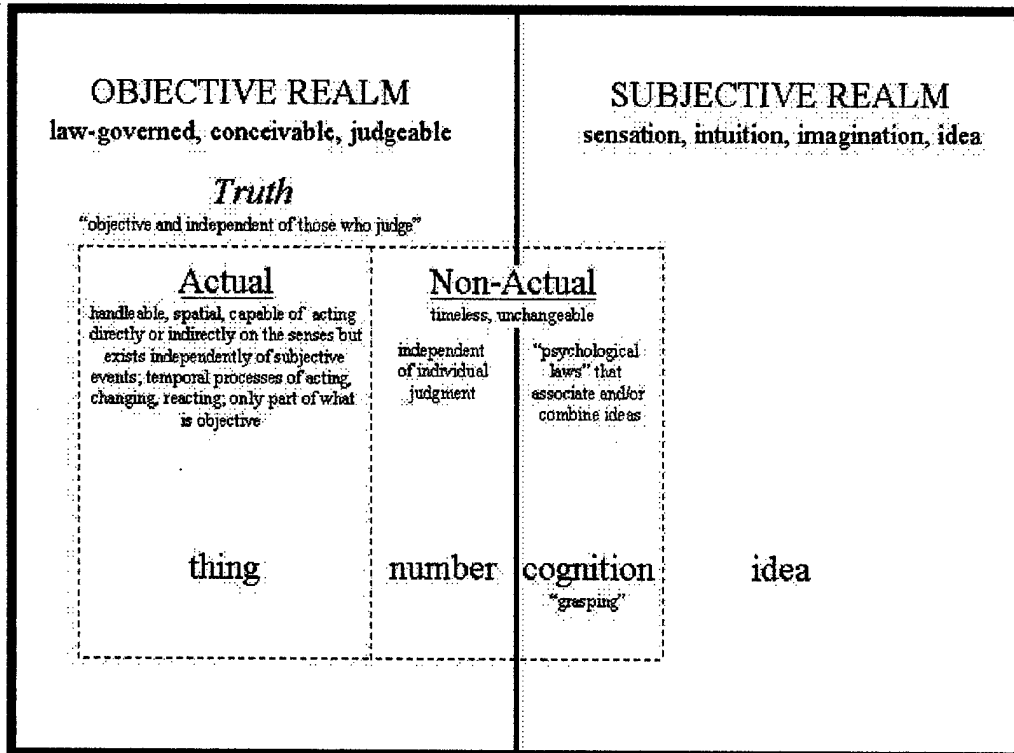
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<sup>67</sup> From Beaney's introduction to *The Frege Reader*, pp. 11-12.

conversion to a predicated variable. In its place, Frege used an instantiation. For example, 'Socrates' became 'the  $x$  such that...', the predicate's role being emphasized, the subject's diminished.

Trouble arose when Frege attempted to explain this new calculus on epistemological grounds. His emphasis on objective knowledge and his desire to mark and keep a sharp distinction between what he considered the logical and the psychological led him to downplay, if not wholly disregard, the subjective aspects of knowledge to which Kant had attended at such great lengths. In that sense, the disappearing logical subject carried over into Frege's worldview, most notably in his conception of the non-actual, whereby he attempted to reimbue certain mental constructs with the status of pure objectivity (see fig. 1, below). Early in his career, for example, Frege described numbers as objective/non-actuals, capturing their essence as a shared aspect of knowledge that existed prior to any individual and that was, therefore, wholly independent of individual judgments. Since the conception of

Figure 1: Frege's worldview



number lay at the very heart of Frege's project, the objective/non-actual was guaranteed a prominent post in his system. Conversely, the subjective realm, consisting of sense perception, private ideas, imagination, and the like, acted primarily to obscure, rather than form or clarify knowledge. As such, the subjective defined what the objective/non-actual was not and received, as Frege's hostility toward idealism grew, more derision than serious attention.

Against idealism, then, Frege's bastion was a pre-Kantian conception of the self; an 'I' that was primarily acted upon as a receptacle of knowledge and not, as the idealists would have it, the predominant active force in the world. Accordingly, logic provided the means for clearing away subjective detritus.

From a post-Kantian, philosophic perspective, Frege's philosophy is somewhat impoverished. Hence the importance of noting, at the outset, Frege's original concern with mathematics, then with logic, then, as his analyses allowed him to see the connections between the two, with the semantics of formal language systems. The logicist project, viewed this way, was essentially a linguistic project, and Frege's philosophy a byproduct thereof.

Thus, insofar as Frege influenced Wittgenstein, Anscombe was correct. The *Tractatus* presented neither a realist nor idealist metaphysic, but, in an occasionally painful amalgamation, a linguistic one. Any debate over whether the *Tractatus* was meant to apply a semantic analysis to ordinary language (by

showing, for example, the limits and shortcomings of all languages) reveals the nature of Frege's influence: first and foremost, it was in formal linguistics and then, to a lesser extent, in philosophical considerations. Where semantics met philosophy, Wittgenstein inherited Frege's realism, which he then set against any inspiration from Schopenhauer.

To understand "Wittgenstein's 'solipsism,'" we don't need "a good deal of sympathy with solipsism" so much as a reminder that we are, everywhere in the *Tractatus*, being confronted by the intimate relation of language to thought, to the extent that any philosophic lines traditionally drawn between the two have all but been erased. On the metaphysical level, language took on the dual roles of (idealist) Absolute Unity and (realist) objective/non-actual. Wittgenstein rendered this as the sphere of the (idealist) possible and the (realist) limit: "To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole."<sup>68</sup> To view the world 'under the aspect of eternity' was to view

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<sup>68</sup> *Tractatus* (Pears and McGuinness translation), 6.45.

the world through the "spectacles" of language, which was, after all, the only way we ever could "view" the world. That fact brings us closer to recognizing language as the perfect arbiter of imperfection, to the "mystical" aspect of life. The strict sense of solipsism was, for Wittgenstein, the perspective *sub specie aeterni*, which represented little more than a linguistic (metaphysical) subject, the point or boundary between the world and the possible. Solipsism coincided with pure realism in language, manifesting the (now trivial) fact that the 'self', 'subject', 'I' and, more importantly, we all, in rendering the world intelligible, cannot escape the limits or avoid the possibilities of language. The self was predestined to lose its identity, to be replaced by the linguistic subject, which, in its ever-diminishing capacity, would in turn shrink and fade away, as it already had, to a large extent, in Frege's system.

From its inception, the strict sense of solipsism existed for exactly nine numbered philosophical remarks before it faded back into language. That Anscombe

didn't follow her own advice against neglecting Frege and reverted to Schopenhauer to explain those remarks speaks to a general uncertainty that had grown up around the concept, a condition of benign ambiguity. This is not so much a criticism of Anscombe, as she merely reflected a general intellectual neglect. Following the demise of idealism, the vast majority of professional philosophers had decided solipsism was too absurd to merit serious consideration on its own.

The condition had changed somewhat in the wake of Wittgenstein's later work. His argument against private language ushered solipsism through to its final manifestations. Carnap and others coined the term 'methodological solipsism' to describe the doctrine in which an individual's thoughts and knowledge originated from facts associated with that individual, independent of facts about the environment. Subsequently, solipsism has again fallen into disregard, though theories concerning identity of the self are now receiving a good deal of attention. In that respect at least, the weed has not been killed off entirely.

## VI. Conclusion: Return to the Moral

The story of solipsism is a cautionary tale on a number of levels, not the least of which speaks to the status of the philosopher's intent. It should be clear by now that solipsism cannot be "solved" as such because, quite frankly, there was never a problem. As Wittgenstein wrote, "*the riddle does not exist.*"<sup>69</sup> The more interesting and fruitful tack appears to lie along an examination of 'why's: why solipsism developed, why it has spread, why we see no value in it, why we have instead placed import on overcoming it. To those ends, two points merit further attention.

First, the solipsistic claim is an inadvertent byproduct of philosophy, a fact that is constantly being reiterated by the use of 'solipsism' as a form of negative criticism. The significance of our continued use of 'solipsism' lies in the inherent contradiction we seem to overlook with each iteration. Solipsism never was a tenable position, no philosopher has ever adopted the doctrine (because it is not a doctrine), yet critics who make the charge speak of solipsism as

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<sup>69</sup> *Tractatus* (Pears and McGuinness translation), 6.5.



though it were some workable conclusion toward which philosopher x has inadvertently tended. With a little reflection we find that the statements 'x is a solipsist' or 'x promotes solipsistic views' are akin to observing 'x chases little green men.' In other words, the charge is deflationary, little more than a straw man that amounts to 'there is no upshot to solipsism, yet the philosophy of x is solipsistic because it heads that way.' The label calls x's patterns of reasoning and argumentation into question as opposed to critiquing the belief or opinion x might be trying to maintain. Normally, criticism of method is fair game in philosophy. In this case, the charge of solipsism is never fair play. The indictment relies not on x making the solipsistic claim as such, but on the perception that x has left enough room for the claim to be inferred by others. To say, for example, Giovanni Gentile's philosophy was solipsistic, is to impose upon Gentile the burden of making some positive (reasonable, acceptable, defensible) accounting for what is ultimately a negative (impossible, unfeasible,

unworkable) doctrine. It is, in other words, to predestine his failure. Moreover, putting forth the criticism of a view as solipsistic only tends to perpetuate the notion that there is indeed something out there—a theory, a doctrine, a discernable vision—that is being referred to when we think or use 'solipsism.' In fact, there is nothing so deliberate behind the term. Only under the Tractarian system that Wittgenstein later repudiated has solipsism ever demonstrated any positive notion.

Second, solipsism is persistent, we might even say pervasive, in the sense that philosophy after Kant has had to contend, however nominally, with the solipsistic claim. Most philosophers address the issue implicitly even when they don't appear to. For example, materialists reacting against idealism pose the contrary and, to the extent their theories are pursued, derive their own incongruities, such as eliminative materialism, which claims there are no mental states. Others have opted for a more direct confrontation. On the analytic side, Norman Malcolm has argued that the

Cartesian mind-body duality is a category mistake.<sup>70</sup>

His colleagues, following Wittgenstein, have attempted to break down the grammar of 'I'.<sup>71</sup> Both lead to the conclusion that the solipsist claim is linguistically absurd in that it confuses, in various ways, logical, epistemological and even metaphysical distinctions.

The same basic attitude is held on the continental side, though obviously, the approach is different: following Fichte, a dialectical interpretation applied to the basic state of consciousness, the *cogito*, reveals that the negation of 'self' is 'other.' Since the world is always explained from the perspective of a subject to which all else is relative, we are presented with a conflict of consciousnesses insofar as a second self, an other, is necessarily at odds with the first ('myself'). Solipsism cannot hold because the self is only a self in relation to some other. Thus phenomenology, Heideggerian ontology and existentialism

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<sup>70</sup> Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, pp. 11-24.

<sup>71</sup> See Norman Malcolm's "Knowledge of Other Minds" from *The Journal of Philosophy* LV, 23 (6 Nov 1958) pp. 969-978 and P. F. Strawson's "Persons" from *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* Vol. 2, Feigl et al eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958; pp. 330-53); both reprinted in Rosenthal (Malcolm pp. 92-97; Strawson pp. 104-115).

all proceed from the notion of a pre-given entity in the world.

Inadvertent yet persistent, solipsism may ultimately amount to nothing more than a thought experiment. That very notion brings us squarely back into the rationalist-empiricist debate over whether, when we think 'solipsism', we are apprehending laws of nature and/or logical truths or merely perceiving certain practical facts. The larger question here is whether and how a concept of solipsism can in any way be made useful and informative about the world. To answer that, we must turn, inevitably perhaps, to the moral realm.

Despite its birth in synonymy with moral egoism, or perhaps because of it, no philosophical work has been undertaken that explores the implications solipsism might have on moral precepts. This is understandable since, strictly carried out, solipsism would seem to preclude any need for morality. But as Wittgenstein attempted to show in the *Tractatus*, the opposite is in fact the case. An 'I' without identity,

a disappearing self, a shrinking linguistic or metaphysical subject, all point to the grace and capriciousness with which we get by in life. A conception of solipsism separate and distinct from moral egoism might therefore be used to strip away the veneer of ethical systems, revealing how a basic notion of moral responsibility must ultimately derive from the consideration, however artificial, of oneself as a sole agent. Such an emphasis on individual responsibility as the basis of moral theory may naturally be perceived as excessive and leading to relativism and, in a case like that of Giovanni Gentile, tyranny. But if we consider that moral solipsism, again in the strictest sense of the latter term, would not make normative claims (who would a solitary 'I' be telling how to act?), we come closer to something useable. From the perspective *sub specie aeterni*, all moral imperatives would fall away and we would be left with a sense of a self in the world in the particular life that self creates.

The story of solipsism has shown how that last statement, 'I am left in the world by myself with the life I create,' cannot be applied in epistemology or ontology without raising problems regarding truth, certainty, proof or evidence. In the moral realm, there is nothing to verify. Our solipsistic perspective is merely a conceit, so the statement carries itself, asking not to be proven but somehow overcome, as had Descartes' doubts. Of course, the idea behind the statement cannot be overcome, for it simply reveals that we everywhere make decisions and that this state is interminable. Such is the very essence of morality; necessity rendered as the act of deciding.

Moral solipsism would therefore proceed from the basic compulsion to act, stripping away any sense of duty, so that ultimately, I find that I am not bound or responsible to anyone, including myself, much less to any ideal, unless I choose to be. I am, at bottom, obliged to act. How I do so, the path I follow, the decisions I make are all played out under the precepts

of moral solipsism as duty-less, duties. The Golden Rule and other moral precepts are accurately cast as options I might follow or ignore, as economies, and conventions, but nothing to which I must be bound.

In the final analysis, solipsism as a moral precept would tell us nothing new about the world or our place in it. It would simply act as another expression of life as it is already, as we have found it, the only value lying in perspicuity rendered.

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